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The American Institute of Sacred Literature

A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE ON THE APOSTOLIC AGE

One of the most remarkable and most uplifting movements of history was the rapid geographical extension of Christianity, and its accession to religious and moral power. There were fundamental conditions in the Mediterranean world that prepared the way for this victory of the gospel. The factors were partly religious, partly moral, partly intellectual, and partly political. There was a great need of mankind to be met, and there was the religion of Jesus and of Paul to meet it. There were the Jews everywhere dispersed throughout the Empire who had brought to many Gentiles the higher Jewish faith and the higher Jewish morals, and this previous mission contributed much to the success of Christianity. Also, the oriental religions were supplying the shortcomings of the Graeco-Roman religion, and the prevailing syncretism made a way for Christianity to enter, and a soil in which it might grow. The history of the progress of Christianity in the first century is fascinating and instructive.

This study of the spread of Christianity in the Apostolic age is conducted by PROFESSOR GEORGE HOLLEY GILBERT. Questions concerning it may be addressed to the AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE.

II. THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE APOSTOLIC AGE

Harnack's *Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* is not assigned for the present course on the Apostolic age with the thought that it is altogether satisfactory. The reader whose interest centers especially on the earliest age of the church has here a vast amount of material which is of no immediate value. He must select and rearrange in order to avail himself of the information to be had from this work which is concerned with the third century no less than with the first. But though not ideal, it seems to the present writer the best to be had. The circumstance that it surveys three centuries and not merely the Apostolic age has this advantage at least, that by its portrayal of the *entire* first missionary epoch of the church, it helps the reader to form a better judgment of the significance of the age of the apostles which was the creative *beginning* of this epoch.

Institutions and movements of the primitive church have some light thrown back upon them from their interpretation in the two subsequent centuries.

For the subject in hand this month—the spread of Christianity in the Apostolic age—the parts of Harnack's work which are to be more carefully considered are Books I and III with a single paragraph from Book IV.

On the broad and interesting question of the diffusion of Judaism at the beginning of the Christian era, Harnack gives a compact and lucid summary of the results reached by many scholars. He inclines to the conservative estimate of the population of the Roman Empire in the time of Augustus, that it was only about fifty-four millions. While admitting that almost 7 per cent of this total were Jews, he would include in this the numerous proselytes of all grades and "in particular kindred Semites of the lower class." Among these Jews of the Diaspora there was a vigorous missionary impulse, and propaganda was carried on in the consciousness that the world needed the revelation of the one God and His holy law which Israel had to give. The wide success of this propaganda was due not only to the essential worth of the Jewish message, but also in part to the fact that the Jews of the Diaspora possessed certain social and political privileges. It should, however, be remembered that these privileges of which our author speaks were somewhat neutralized by the widespread and implacable dislike which the masses felt for the Jews. As far as we can judge of the "God-fearing" Gentiles from the references to them in the New Testament, we should say that they were led over to Judaism by its power to satisfy their moral and religious nature rather than by any lower, more material considerations.

In his statement regarding other external conditions of the spread of Christianity, Harnack seems to give much greater influence to facts which were Roman in character, as the fact of world-empire, the fact of international communication, Roman jurisprudence, and the policy of religious toleration which Rome practiced, than he gives to Hellenism. The hellenization of the world, particularly in the matter of language, is accorded a prominent place among the external conditions, but the question may be raised whether the process of hellenization did not have even greater importance than our author seems to allow. Thus, e.g., it was not so much the scattering of the Jews throughout all the Empire that conditioned the spread of Christianity as it was the *liberalizing* of these Jews. It was the liberalized Hellenists who became the most efficient missionaries in the Apostolic age.

Of the internal conditions which determined the spread of Christianity the two supremely important were polytheism and syncretism. The vital embodiment of the former was in the cult of the emperors. Polytheism, except in this political aspect of it, had been undermined by the advance of knowledge (cf. the retrogression of native religions in India and China today). Syncretism, however, by which is meant the mingling of all the various elements of living faith, chiefly the attainment of Greek philosophy, was a "secret ally" of Christian preaching. The paradoxical remark is made that Christianity had nothing to do with this syncretism save to cleanse, to simplify, and to *complicate* it.

The attitude of Jesus toward the universal mission is briefly considered, but is not reckoned among the *conditions* of the spread of the new religion. If, however, the preaching of Jesus was really universalistic in character, implicitly rather than formally, this fact might certainly be counted as a prime condition of the world-mission. It seems to the present writer that Harnack goes somewhat too far in his affirmation of the national horizon of Jesus. Thus he says that the word "just" in Mark 7:27 is not to be "pressed." But without any pressing whatever does it not point to a mission of the gospel among the Gentiles? We may grant that both evangelists who relate the incident regarded it as an exceptional case, i.e., an exception in the *practice* of Jesus. Regarding his own practice there can indeed be no doubt, but we cannot at once assume that he regarded his own practice in this particular as furnishing a rule from which his disciples were never to depart. We must of course agree with Harnack that the formal command of Matt. 28:19 was never given by Jesus.

We come now to the transition of the gospel from the Jews to the Gentiles. Though our author says it is not quite clear how the gentile mission arose, he manifestly sees its origin in the cleavage between the Hebrews and the Hellenists in the Jerusalem church. This cleavage brought about the appointment of the Seven, and this fact in turn gave Stephen his opportunity. From his activity arose the persecution and the consequent dispersion of many believers, some of whom at length preached the gospel to the Gentiles in Antioch. That three of the five prophets and teachers who are mentioned in Acts 13:1, i.e., all except Barnabas and Saul, were the identical persons who instituted the gentile mission in Antioch is Harnack's conjecture. In this church at Antioch, founded by Hellenists and consisting of Hellenists and Gentiles, there seems to have been no controversy over the relation of Gentiles to the law until conservatives came down from Jerusalem. That was

the hour when the reaction of Jews and Jewish-Christians against the universalism of the gospel began—a reaction that continued with unabated force until the overthrow of the Jewish people.

On the attitude of Jewish-Christians and of Paul toward gentile Christianity the student will find Harnack's present view not in the work now under consideration but in his *Acts of the Apostles*, which was considered last month.

We pass now to the first two chapters of Book III on the "Missionaries and Their Methods," and shall later return to the last chapter of Book I on the "Results of the First Missions."

The preliminary question as to the origin of the term "apostle" is important. It is held that Matthew, Mark, and John are ignorant of the title as a designation of the Twelve. Matt. 10:2 is regarded as a revision of the original, and Mark 6:30 as referring to the temporary mission on which the Twelve had been sent in the lifetime of Jesus. The question may be raised here in passing whether this single occurrence of the term in Mark, like the use of "Christ" in 1:1, may not be regarded as an unconscious antedating of the historical usage of the word.

The introduction of the term "apostle" is attributed to Paul, but his usage is fluctuating. Of the two senses in which he uses the word—a wider and a narrower—it would seem as though the latter were the original inasmuch as he held the Twelve to have been the nucleus of the apostolate. The word "apostle" is very seldom limited by Paul to the Twelve, possibly only twice (I Cor. 9:5; Gal. 1:17).

Luke's references to the inner circle of the friends of Jesus combine the usage of the earliest tradition and that of Paul. In the gospel he calls them the "Twelve" or the "Eleven" and in Acts usually the "apostles." It is to be noticed that his conception of what was requisite to constitute one an apostle does not agree with Paul's. According to the standard of Acts 1:21, Paul was not an apostle.

How Paul came to use the word "apostle" at all is a point on which our author does not hold a decided opinion. It is thought probable that he was led to it by an existing Jewish use of the term. After the destruction of Jerusalem the agents of the patriarchate in the Diaspora were called "apostles," and it is plausibly held that the Jews would not have adopted, at that time, a term in common use among their enemies. The query is raised whether Paul may not have been a Jewish "apostle" in his pre-Christian days. He was certainly a "messenger" to the Diaspora from the high priest in Jerusalem.

The early missionaries or preachers of Christianity were called apostles, prophets, and teachers. Of these terms two at least were taken directly from Judaism. Prophecy was in full bloom among the Jews in the time of Jesus and His apostles, and the high position of rabbis explains the prestige of Christian teachers. But the *grouping* of these three classes had a Christian origin. As evidence that the primitive church did group them together, the author points to Acts 13:1; I Cor. 12:28, and also to the Didache. From the same sources, with the addition of Heb. 13:7 and kindred passages which give unique honor to the speaking of God's word, the author holds that apostles, prophets, and teachers were all occupied with the word of God, and that they were assigned by Him to the church *as a whole*. To this Catholic mission of apostles, prophets, and teachers is to be attributed in large measure the homogeneity of primitive Christendom. The Catholic Epistles of the New Testament are to be associated with this Catholic mission of apostles, prophets, and teachers. The literary phenomenon is to be explained by the previous institution.

In speaking of methods of the early mission, Harnack does not mean that this mission was carried on by a systematic and rigid employment of certain external means. "A living faith requires no special methods for its propagation." The simple course of the mission was characterized by preaching and baptism. Though the New Testament contains no missionary treatise and no account of the inner rise and growth of any Christian personality, we may form an idea of Paul's preaching to the Gentiles from the first three chapters of Romans and the seventeenth chapter of Acts. To these may be added the first letter to the Thesalonians. We gather from such passages that Paul sought first to awaken a feeling of sinfulness, that he then developed the conception of the cross as the wisdom and power of God, and that he usually made some use of the coming judgment.

Of baptism in the earliest Christian community our author treats in few words. Indeed his treatment is quite fragmentary and incidental. He thinks that the rite was most welcome to pagans with their craving for mysteries, and that it was the subject of much speculation from the very first. Paul's remarks on baptism in I Cor. 1:13-17 are not thought to show any depreciation of the rite. He is thought to have considered it "simply indispensable." But this judgment of the author is not supported by any arguments, and need not be taken too seriously.

Of more significance for the spread of Christianity in the Apostolic age is that section of Book IV which deals with women. As the propa-

ganda of Judaism had been very successful among women, so also was the earliest propaganda of the gospel. The example of Jesus was here significant, though the author does not attempt to describe its influence on Paul. The apostle's declaration of the perfect equality of the sexes before God made woman independent in the church. The numerous New Testament data which illustrate woman's activity in the primitive church are gathered together with occasional suggestive annotation, as when the conversion of Apollos is ascribed to Prisca rather than to her husband. The prominence of women as teachers and as deaconesses continued for more than a century.

The result of missions in the Apostolic age is summed up, geographically, in the statement that about 50 A.D. Christianity was an ellipse whose foci were Jerusalem and Antioch, and that a half-century later these foci were Ephesus and Rome.

When Paul wrote to the Romans that he had preached the gospel from Jerusalem and round about even unto Illyricum, he meant that he had carried it throughout the Greek world. Yet he never alludes to Egypt, which was an important part of that world. Harnack raises the question whether Paul thought of Egypt as an utterly hopeless field or knew that others were laboring there and so did not go thither himself. Perhaps we are not to adopt either of these explanations. The hopelessness of Egypt as a field for the gospel is surely not to be inferred from Rev. 11:8, and we may not infer that Paul refused to go thither because he knew that other missionaries were already there. He went to Ephesus though he knew that Prisca and Aquila were laboring in that city. As Paul's letters are addressed to particular churches and deal with their specific needs, it is not strange that he makes no allusion to Egypt, and as for Luke it is quite obvious that he makes no attempt to be exhaustive in his account of the passing of the Gospel from the Jews to the Gentiles. Whether Paul knew of work in Egypt or not, it is highly probable that the gospel was preached there from an early day.

Paul's plan to cross the Roman world and visit Spain is thought by Harnack to have been realized. But the greatness of his service did not lie in the geographical extent of his tours: it lay rather in his power to train up fellow-laborers, and to organize his churches. While it is true that he did not understand Hellenism profoundly, he understood it well enough to give the gospel permanent roots in Hellenic soil. The most abiding result of Paul's missionary activity is, of course, his letters. Through them he became the teacher of Christendom.

It is regarded as doubtful whether the christianizing of Asia Minor was shared in by Peter, but certain that a prominent Jerusalemite—John the presbyter—had a part in it both by personal oversight and by his writings (Harnack assigns to him all the Johannine writings in the New Testament), certain also that Philip and his daughters shared in it.

In his second volume, Harnack gives a list of places in which we are certain that there were Christians as early as the first century. Thirty-nine cities and towns are mentioned and nine regions mainly Roman provinces, in which there were a number of Christian communities.¹

In view of the nature and extent of our New Testament writings, it is not strange that we are unable to show a longer list of places in which Christianity had been established by the close of the first century. When we consider that twenty-three or twenty-four of these cities and towns in Harnack's list are mentioned only in connection with Paul's work as a missionary, when further we bear in mind the significant glimpses we have of such efficient laborers as those who founded the first gentile church in Antioch, and when we remember that the missionary impulse in the primitive church seems to have been both general and persistent, we cannot doubt that this list showing the geographical spread of Christianity in the Apostolic age gives us only a fragmentary idea of the subject.

At the same time Christian people in general are probably inclined to overestimate the impression made by the Gospel during the first age. Its numerical victory was not comparable with that which Mohammedanism made in the same length of time. The language of Paul in such passages as Rom. 1:8; Thess. 1:8; and Col. 1:6 is an extreme, though natural, exaggeration. It is likely that in the decade which witnessed the martyrdom of Peter and Paul the Christian community in cities like Rome and Antioch was rather as an invisible lever than a conspicuous and recognized feature of the public life. Modern missions in civilized lands, as in Japan and China, can probably show, as indeed they ought, greater results than were achieved in the Apostolic age.

¹We have not included in this count Arabia, Illyria, or Dalmatia, all of which stand in Harnack's list, though Illyria is bracketed. There is no evidence whatever that Paul labored in Arabia, and no proof whatever that there were believers in Dalmatia.